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ABSTRACT

Although currently expressed in terms of linear and intuitive halves of the brain, the concept of androgyny (the integration of male and female characteristics within each person) is central to ancient myths and religions. Most accounts concern an initial separation of the sexes and subsequent efforts to unite male and female forces. For example, the Chinese polar halves of Yin and Yang were formed from a single fluid, and the Hindus speak of the splitting of the original creative force called the Supreme Self. In Western myths, the creator remains entire and the split transpires within the creature (e.g., Adam and Eve). The Greek version suggests that the gods split people in half to punish them for their conceit. All of these myths express concern for uniting the separation (or dual halves of the psyche) through symbols of androgyny. By combining both linear (male) and intuitive (female) qualities within the individual psyche, one unites the polar forces which represent creation and growth. Thus Eastern icons are often hermaphroditic, as are Christian, Persian, and Hindu-Buddhist angels. Traditional rituals such as marriage and alchemy also portray union of polar opposites. An awareness of these ancient archetypes can lend a more complete understanding to current sex role research. (KC)

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# SYMBOLS OF SEXUAL SEPARATION AND ANDROGYNY IN MYTH AND RELIGION

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SYMBOLS OF SEXUAL SEPARATION AND ANDROGYNY
IN MYTH AND RELIGION

ABSTRACT

Recently, androgyny, the quality of being both male and female, has received a great deal of attention in relation to the modern goal of eliminating traditional male/female sex-role stereotypes. However, androgyny is by no means a new concept. Symbols of androgyny exist in many ancient myths and religions, and the concept itself may be described as an archetype in the human psyche. This paper discusses some of these manifestations of symbols of androgyny. An awareness of these pre-existing archetypes can lend a more complete understanding to current sex-role research.

# SYMBOLS OF SEXUAL SEPARATION AND ANDROGYNY IN MYTH AND RELIGION

## I. Polar Conflict

Human beings live in a world of conflict. Numerous objects and concepts contain their own opposites within themselves. Night and day; good and evil; life and death--each of these represent opposite poles of the same concept. As such, they are inseparable, and their conflict is necessary because conflict leads to movement. In the words of Hegel (1929):

> It is only because a thing contains a contradiction within itself that it moves and acquires impulse and activity. That is the process of all motion and all development.

This polarity is particularly obvious in the concept and physical manifestation of male/female. The physical illustration of diverse sides of the same species coming together to generate new life is a powerful example of the polarity principle. Taken a step further, this male/female principle has come to symbolize the union of opposites within the individual psyche.

During the middle ages, long before science demonstrated that individuals carry both male and female elements within their

glandular structure, it was said that "every man carries a woman within himself" (Jung, 1977). The same is also true of women, every female having a set of so-called masculine characteristics.

Dr. Carl Jung dubbed these feminine and masculine archetypes anima and animus. According to Jungians, a man experiences such so-called feminine emotions as vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature, and his relation to the unconscious through his anima; while women develop initiative, courage, objectivity, and spirituality through their animus.

Many people object to the sexist connotations of lumping certain characteristics under masculine and feminine classifications and instead speak of linear and intuitive halves of the brain. The linear half of the brain controls such linear thinking as logic, sequentiality, and the ability to focus on one object at a time. The intuitive half includes creative immagination, tactile and artistic development, and intuition.

Whether they choose to regard psychological polarity through the symbolism of gender or in an asexual sense, psychologists agree that an individual must successfully combine the dual aspects of the psyche in order for her or his personality to be complete. The inability to accept these inner emotions can lead to unresolved personal conflict and a splintering of the psyche.

Because this polarity within the individual plays such an important part in personal growth, it has become a major preoccupation in almost every culture. This concern is communicated

through the popular traditions of myth and religion, where it manifests itself in such forms as stories of creation and separation of the sexes, and subsequent efforts to unite male and female forces through symbols of androgyny. This paper will examine examples of these communicative acts, beginning with stories of creation and sexual separation.

## II. In The Beginning: The Primordial Split

Humans have always believed in a prehistoric golden age when the problems which currently seem so pressing did not exist. As people saw the problem of the psyche's (and nature's) polarity reflected in the male/female principle, they clung to the belief that during some forgotten age there was no sexual division, but that man and woman (symbolizing the dual aspects of mind and nature) existed as one complete, resolved unit.

Eastern cultures see this complete unit existing as the Creator, or Creative Force, which splits itslef so that the two halves may generate the universe. This illustrates the necessity for polar conflict, as creation cannot take place until after the opposing halves generate energy.

The Chinese call these polar halves Yin and Yang, and in the Huai-nan tzu relate how they were formed from a single fluid:

> Tao begins in the Great Void, which engenders the universe, which produced the fluid. In this a separation takes place. The purer and

> brighter particles are thinner and finer and form heaven. The coarser and more turbid accumulate and become earth. . . . The combined essence of heaven and earth is Yin and Yang, the activity of Yin and Yang produces the four seasons, and the dispersion of the essence of the four seasons produces the ten thousand things. (Watts, 1963)

The Wu-neng tzu describes the generation of animals from the Yin and Yang fluids:

> Anterior to the separation of heaven and earth there was a single, chaotic fluid. This ran over and was divided into two modes, there were pure and muddy, light and heavy parts. The light and pure ones went up and formed Yang and heaven, the heavy and muddy ones sank down and became Yin and earth. Heaven was hard and strong and in motion, earth was soft and yielding and in repose. This was the natural state of the fluids. After heaven and earth had taken up their positions, the Yin and Yang fluids mixed and all animals with skin, scales, fur, feathers, and shells were created thereby. (Watts, 1963)

While the Hindus of India have a similar concept of the splitting of an original entity, their creative force is personified in the form of a Supreme Self. The Upinshads, a set of Hindu documents which go back as far as 800 B.C. gives this account:

> In the beginning this was Self alone, in

the shape of a person (purusha). He looking round saw nothing but his Self. He first said, "This is I"; therefore he became I by name. . . .

But he felt no delight. Therefore a man who is lonely feels no delight. He wished for a second. He was so large as man and wife together. He then made his Self to fall in two and thence arose husband and wife. Therefore Yajnavalkya said: "We two are thus (each of us) like half a shell." Therefore the void which was there is filled by the wife. He embraced her, and men were born.

She thought, "How can he embrace me, after having produced me from himself? I shall hide myself.

She then became a cow, the other became a bull and embraced her, and hence cows were born. The one became a mare, the other a stallion; the one a male ass, the other a female ass. He embraced her, and hence goats and sheep were born. And thus he created everything that exists in pairs, down to the ants.

He knew, "I indeed am this creation, for I created all this." Hence he became the creation, and he who knows this lives in this his creation. (Watts, 1963)

It was Joseph Campbell who first pointed out that while Eastern creation myths deal with a primordial splitting apart of the Creator, in Western myths, the Creator remains entire and the split transpires within the creature. (Watts, 1963). According to Judeo-Christian tradition, God first created the male Adam, and from him brought forth the mate Eve. A richer version of the familiar story comes from Louis Ginsberg's version of the haggadah, or legends which have accumulated around the original tale during the course of many centuries:

> The Divine resolution to bestow a companion on Adam met the wishes of man, who had been overcome by a feeling of isolation when the animals came to him in pairs to be named. . . .
>
> The woman destined to become the true companion of man was taken from Adam's body, for only when like is joined unto like the union is indissoluble. The creation of woman from man was possible because Adam originally had two faces, which were separated at the birth of Eve. (Watts, 1963)

Interestingly enough, the haggadah, unlike the traditional Bible, states that Adam had a first wife named Lilith. Being made out of the same dust as Adam, she demanded full equality with him, and soon deserted him in favor of a life of her own. It was only after Lilith had left that God made Eve.

In the Greek version of the separation of the sexes, which Plato attributes to Aristophanes in the Symposium, the gods split people in half to punish them for their conceit:

> The sexes were originally three, men women, and the union of the two; and they were made round--having four hands, four feet, two faces on a round neck, and the rest to correspond. Terrible was their strength and swiftness; and they were essaying to scale heaven and attack the gods. Doubt reigned in the celestial councils; the gods were divided between the desire of quelling the pride of man and the fear of losing the sacrifices. At last Zeus hit upon an expedient. Let us cut them in two, he said; then they will only have half their strength, and we shall have twice as many sacrifices. He spake, and split them as you might split an egg with an hair; and when this was done, he told Apollo to give their faces a twist and re-arrange their persons, taking out the wrinkles and tying the skin in a knot about the navel. (Plato)

Thus, the concept of the two sexes descending from a single source appears to be a cross-cultural concept. But what happened after the split? People's concern with uniting the dual halves of the psych are communicated through symbols of androgyny.

## III. Mending the Rip

Lately, the concept of androgyny has received a great deal of attention in its relation to the modern goal of eliminating traditional male/female sex-role stereotypes. Yet, androgyny is by no means a new concept. Symbols of androgyny exist in many ancient myths and religions. An examination of these symbols provides a vital background for the redefinition of gender-related stereotypes.

The Random House Dictionary defines androgyny as "being both male and female; hermaphroditic." June Singer, in her book Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality, gives a much more colorful description:

> . . . in its broadest sense (androgyny) can be defined as the One which contains the Two; namely the male (andro-) and the female (gyne-). Androgyny is an archetype in the human psyche. . . . it continually represents itself in myths and symbols which have the capacity--if recognized and invoked--to energize the creative potentcy of men and women in ways that most people hardly imagine today. (Singer, 1977)

By combining both linear and intuitive qualities within the individual psyche, one unites the polar forces which have become archetypal representations of creation and growth. As Lao-tzu stated in the Tao-te-king:

> He who knows the male
> And yet keeps to the female

Becomes like the space containing the world.
As space containing the world
He has the eternal virtue (power) which leaves not,
and he returns to the state of infancy. (Watts, 1963)

The creative potential of the androgynous fusion is often communicated through mythic and religious symbolism. Mythological images often imply that holiness is hermaphroditic (androgyny in physical form), for if holiness is wholeness, the complete human being is at once male and female. In Buddhist iconography, the Bodhisattva is frequently a hermaphrodite. For example, the Bodhisattve Avalokiteshvara, though masculine in name, is always feminine or near feminine in form, especially in the Far East, where he appears as Kwan-yin or Kannon, the "goddess" of mercy. The obviously androgynous symbol of a retractable penis is among the traditional thirty-two physical marks of a Buddha, and it is not uncommon to find ardhanari or "half-woman" images of Shiva in which the left half of the body is female and the right male. (Cirlot, 1971)

In Christianity, the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, is often regarded as Word-and-Wisdom, or Logos-Sophia. This may be traced to the feminine personification of Divine Wisdom who speaks in the Book of Proverbs. Jesus Christ alludes to the androgyne when he states that in the Kingdom of Heaven, men and women shall be "as angels, neither marrying nor giving in marriage." Interestingly enough, the angel in Christian iconography is almost always feminine in form though masculine in name, as are Persian (islamic) and Hindu-Buddhist angels (deva).

In the Symposium, Plato states that after Zeus cut people in half:

> The two halves went about looking for one another, and were ready to die of hunger in one another's arms. . . . But if Hephaestus were to come to them with his instruments and propose that they should be melted into one and remain one here and hereafter, they would acknowledge that this was the very expression of their want. For love is the desire of the whole, and the pursuit of the whole is called love. (Plato)

In this Greek myth, the completion of the whole and symbolic rejoining of the individual personality is not necessarily heterosexual. Halved females who were originally split from a dual female desired union with a complementary female half and halved males which had been split from a dual male desired union with a complementary male; only male and female halves who were the products of a split androgyne desired union with a partner of the opposite sex.

Besides myths which symbolically communicate the union of the dual aspects of the psyche, traditional rituals physically portray the union of polar opposites. A cross-cultural example of this is the ritual of marriage. Within the Christian tradition, for example, the sacrament of marriage is portrayed as the ideal relationship between the sexes, in which man and woman come together in a permanent union dedicated to the glory of God and the regeneration of life through children. This physical union of male and female is consecrated with the warning that what God

hath joined together let no man put asunder.

The sex act also communicates the union of opposites in religious rituals other than marriage. Ceremonies exist in both Taoist and Hindu faiths in which participants perform ritual intercourse. The object of this intercourse is not romance or procreation, but rather, in the words of Franz von Baader, "to help man and woman to integrate internally the complete human image; that is to say, the divine and original image." (von Baader cited by Colegrave, 1979)

Alchemical rituals also communicate the union of polar opposites through the physical manipulation of symbols. Western traditions of alchemy are directly related to gnostisism, a descendent of the haggadah quoted earlier. The alchemists sought to break down matter into its original state or prima materia, and free the spirit imprisioned inside, thereby producing philosophers gold.

> The alchemists often referred to their method as a "spagyric" art, a word compounded from two Greek words meaning "to take apart" and "to put together. . . ." It is. . . a process of working with. . . opposites. To accomplish the goal of integration, the manipulation of opposites is part of the technique. As Ralph Metzner has described it: "it is a masculine, dynamic function. Synthesis contains, combines, encloses: it is a feminine magnetic function. The first fusion of male and female energies, known as the conjunction, is the central process of alchemy." (Singer, 1977)

The prima materia itself is symbolized in the figure of Mercurius, in whom all things are combined. The opposites are present in him at the beginning of the process, but not yet defined. Depicted as a hermaphrodite, he is the agent for transformation. Psychologically, Mercurius represents the agency of consciousness which increases awareness of individual potentials for discriminating and evaluation:

> An important aspect of the alchemical work was that the combination of "female" and "male" principles referred not only to the ways in which the work was carried on, nor even to the materials that were used--each metal had a masculine or feminine association that corresponded with the planetary power. . . . The work itself was carried out by a man and a woman, the adept and the soror. . . . Pictures depicting the alchemical art often show the man on the right and the woman on the left performing the various operations in the vessel which is between them. The process is referred to as the "alchemical wedding," and it proceeds on many levels of understanding" (Singer, 1977)

Chinese alchemists also believed that the adept could discover the source of life through the synthesis of masculine and feminine principles. While the full history of Chinese alchemy has yet to be written, Suki Colegrave gives this excellent description in her book The Spirit of the Valley:

Whether the Chinese alchemists worked with actual minerals or plants, or whether they worked with breathing, callisthenics, or meditational or sexual exercises, they shared a common assumption about the process of nature: all creation, they believed, was subject to the principle of metamorphosis, so just as metals have the possibility, in time, of becoming gold that is pure and imperishable, all humans have the potential for perfect health and wisdom, for an immortality of the body as well as the soul. They thought that since this process from imperfection to perfection is inherent in all things, and will spontaneously unfold in its own time, the alchemist could assist nature in the perfection of her progency by hastening the process of time. By learning the secrets of metamorphosis, they believed they could enter into an active collaboration with nature and so help to transform not only their own lives but the external world as well. . . .

The central purpose of the Chinese alchemists was not to increase their wealth through aurifaction (the making of real gold) or aurifiction (the making of imitation gold), nor to defy their nature by pursuing immortality, but to understand and thereby hasten the natural process of metamorphosis inherent in each person, leading to the realization of harmony and immortality in place of disharmony and death. (Colgrave, 1979)

## IV. Conclusion

The development of the individual psyche is dependent upon the integration of all aspects of human nature. This includes the synthesis of linear and intuitive modes of thought, which are communicated through the symbols of male, female, and androgyne. The popular traditions of myth and religion portray the dicotomy between the linear and the intuitive through myths of sexual separation, and communicate the linear/intuitive synthesis through the union of complimentary personalities or matter, or through single androgynous characters. While these works differ according to cultural and chronological influences, the common themes of the separation and reunion of complimentary poles remains similar. An awareness of these pre-existing archetypes can lend a more complete understanding to current sex-role research.

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